



For Afro-Colombian women, International Women's Day means continued fear, violence and threats

"Death to frogs"

"Do you know where your children are?"

To continue talking about the disappeared

Guerrilla defenders we are near you

We know your movements, where you study and work"

(EARMM, a paramilitary group in Colombia that is targeting Women leaders)

These are common threats Afro-Colombian women human rights defenders receive almost every day, signed by armed groups supposedly demobilized in 2006. The government calls these groups "criminal gangs" (bandas criminales BACRIM). But for Afro-Colombian women, what they are called matters little when the result of their activity is continued threats, violence and murder. The boldness and visibility of these groups stems from an impunity that has allowed them to impose a reign of terror in areas stretching from rural isolated communities to urban neighborhoods. For Afro-Colombian women, the consequences are brutal and predictable—they are the ones who will disproportionately suffer all forms of physical and social violence: displacement, disappearances, forced labour with one armed group or another, sexual enslavement and rape.

During the first few months of 2013, women human rights defenders and women's organizations in Colombia have been receiving an increasing number of threats. The recent targeting of [Maria Ligia Chaverra](#), a 70-year-old Afro-Colombian leader of Curvarado, Choco is a glaring example of the widespread targeting of women currently taking place. She was identified by the local media as a supporter of guerrillas--a charge that in context of Colombia leads to being marked for death. Ironically, the media that made the charge is the very same media that has been silent about violence in Buenaventura perpetrated by paramilitary forces. In one violent incident in October 2012, 35 people were killed in one week alone and a list was revealed containing the names of 50 women targeted for death by a group called the Urabeños.

Colombian women therefore find themselves asking the question: What do we have to celebrate on this International Women's Day when in Colombia it is clear that the life of a woman means nothing?

What do we have to celebrate today when the fundamental rights and freedoms of women are constantly being abused by government authorities and armed groups?

The Colombian government has a responsibility to ensure the protection of women, as women and as human rights defenders. But the government does not provide effective protection and assurance of security for women because it fails to acknowledge the source of the problem – the existence of paramilitary structures that act with impunity because the government pretends they don't exist.

What can the Colombian government do to prove that it has a commitment to protecting women beyond superficial rituals connected to “international days”? First, the Director of the Protection Unit, Andres Villamizar, who will be in Washington DC can produce a concrete and effective agenda to ensure the protection of women's human rights defenders. This should be coupled with a stated commitment to take seriously the need to investigate and bring the perpetrators of human rights violations to justice.

Secondly, President Juan Manuel Santos should include in his speech for International Women's Day a line recognizing that women human rights defenders are indeed threatened by paramilitaries, that these forces exist, and that he is resolutely committed to dismantling these forces in order to guarantee real security for women, their children, their families and their organizations.

Gestures alone will not solve the problems facing Afro-Colombians, and Afro-Colombian women in particular, because the pressures on black communities in Colombia are complex. However, they would signal that the government is beginning to move towards living up to its moral and legal responsibilities to protect the rights of its own citizens. It will be up to us to ensure accountability—and that is something we are prepared to do.

On this International Women's Day, Afro-Colombian women human rights defenders call on civil societies around the world to help us draw attention to the crimes and human rights violations being committed against women, particularly Afro-descendant women, in the Americas. We demand from States and society at large that there be a real commitment to ending racial discrimination, crimes against women and patriarchal oppression. For it is only when such oppressive practices come to an end that we will truly be able to join in the celebration of International Women's Day with women of all racial, ethnic, social and religious backgrounds. And it will be a day in which we will all know a new world is in existence.

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